

Art

ST. JUDGE
10-21-73

The Davis Tapes - New Art Form at Santa Clara

By Alfred Frankenstein

ST. JUDE is the patron saint of ultimate extremity. You pray to him when everything else has been exhausted and the impossible remains your only hope. And so when the de Saisset Art Gallery at the University of Santa Clara received an endowment in support of an annual show, it was promptly dubbed the St. Jude Invitational.

This year's St. Jude Invitational is the first one-man show of videotape we have had in the Bay Region. It is the work of the New York artist Douglas Davis who came to the Santa Clara campus and made seven videotapes there. He also brought with him some of his older work, notably one called "Talk-Out," made in collaboration with James Harithas, director of the Everson Museum in Syracuse, N.Y., which was the first museum in the country to establish a videotape department under a full-time curator. For videotape is growing as an art medium and has already sprouted several different schools and styles.

Douglas Davis does not hold with the abstract videotapists, like Don Hallelck, whose work, as currently displayed at the San Francisco Museum of Art, was reviewed with great enthusiasm in these columns not long ago. Neither does he hold with the conceptual art-

ists, who seem to use videotape for the purpose of driving everybody insane. He has some sense of the medium and its potentials, and if his practice has not entirely caught up with his theory as yet, he has time on his side.

In a very remarkable book which Davis recently published, "Art and the Future," a survey of the collaboration between art, science, and technology, is a very remarkable sentence: "The future . . . will fail us

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only if we surrender knowledge and technology to the utilitarians." Nothing could be less utilitarian than the Davis tapes at Santa Clara.

The great trouble with a videotape is that it takes so long to see it. You can't run in and run out as you can at a show of paintings. I was told that to see the entire Davis exhibition would take over four hours, but nobody is expected to gulp it all down at once. Taking his cue from television, where videotape was

born, Davis likes a loose, open, casual, unstructured relationship between the work and its audience. He doesn't mind if you get up and go to the bathroom while the set is on; he rather enjoys the idea.

I paid close attention to the seven tapes made at and for Santa Clara and saw random samples of the others.

THE BEST of the Santa Clara tapes, I thought, was one called "Spiralling." Davis' scenario for this is as follows:

"1. Hundreds of students out on a football field, arranged in concentric rings. Everyone is holding some method of reproduction — cameras of any kind, mirrors, drawing pencils. I am in the middle. As tape starts I pan around the figures, all standing still. About a minute.

"2. I crouch as I pan, a signal to the inner ring to begin to pan, moving around me, which signals the next ring, and the next. Very slowly at first. About a minute.

"3. The movement increases slowly until at the end it is racing and people fall dizzied to the ground."

The remarkable thing about this work is its choreography. It starts with the people moving around the camera and ends with the

camera moving around the people, the whole at ever-increasing speed. In some of Davis' compositions there is little rhythm; they subscribe to what, in a different context, Sam Hunter called "the esthetics of boredom," and sometimes the esthetics there are hard to see.

A most entertaining tape by Davis is one in which his two hands explore the surface of the screen. "After about a minute the hands begin to scratch and claw at the screen, sense of panic slowly building. About 2 minutes. Tape ends with the hands furiously knocking, trying to break and reach through the screen at the viewer."

I saw very little panic in that tape, except in the knocking at the end, and that seemed comical in its tiny violence. Most of the time those hands were engaged in a very animated dialogue. They appeared again, in a tape wherein the camera was dangled, twisting and turning, from the top of a high building while the hands reached out of a window beseechingly and at last won their prize; the camera dropped into the hands and their fingers closed over it to finish the piece.

In another composition, the camera explored the lumps and hollows of a nude figure, transforming them into shorelines and mountain ranges and dissolving them into light. In still another, Davis stopped automobiles with a smoke bomb in the middle of the street, jammed up the traffic at least from San Jose to Burlingame, and then walked off. This resembled the Happening of blessed memory rather more than the rest of

the tapes. And along about this time I got into an argument with George Bowling of the museum staff, who has long worked with videotape.

BOWLING insisted that one of the major virtues of video is that it happens in "real time." The ball game, the Senatorial investigation, or the Presidential speech that you see on television is occurring then and there, as you see it. But I replied that what we were seeing was a set of tapes taken weeks earlier: the events on the screen were happening in past time, not "real time." Bowling nevertheless insisted that the videotape preserved a sense of real time far more successfully than motion picture film, and that is clearly true for him.

One very important difference between videotape and film is that in watching video you are looking directly at a source of light rather than reflected light, as is the case with film. (And where did that headache come from?) Video color is much cruder than film color, but Bowling suggested that this did not make a great deal of difference to Davis.

The Santa Clara tapes are currently being shown in a gallery with two screens, or monitors as they are called in the trade, placed one on top of the other. The upper one is smaller than the lower, much more brilliant in light, and much more garish in color. The two screens are used as a matter of convenience because the room sometimes fills up with students and under those circumstances the larger, lower

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er screen is difficult to see. But the contrast in size, color, and illumination between the two is quite interesting. I thought it was deliberate until Bowling said it wasn't.

"Talk-Out" seemed to involve a good deal of self-congratulatory verbiage about the fact that in it Davis and Harithas were going to talk to people who phoned in, as if they had just discovered that form of communication. But they also put on

some of Davis' earlier tapes, including a rather fascinating one that involved numbers inscribed in many different forms on many different surfaces while the Boston Symphony Orchestra played the "Boiero" by Ravel. "Music," said Goethe,

"is the pleasure we derive from counting without knowing it." (Or was it Plato who said that?)

The counting was often not to be sensed in Davis' tapes and they contained a little too much of his own face and figure, and some of them —

not those made in Santa Clara — were maddeningly repetitive. Some of this is deliberate and arises from Davis' casual, offhand, exploratory approach. But in much that went on I felt myself to be a witness to the crude beginnings of a new

art form, one with extraordinary prospects, no past, and a somewhat problematical present.

A month ago, however, I'd have said, on the basis of what I had seen, that videotape was a hopeless dead end. Hallock and Davis have demonstrated, each from a different point of the artistic compass, that it must be accounted one of the most interesting possibilities of the century's closing decades.

Thank you, St. Jude.

PHOTOGRAPH of Igor Stravinsky is in an exhibition of prints by Arnold Newman, on view at the University of California Art Museum in Berkeley through November 4.

